

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 03131 311339Z
ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEAE-00 CIAE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
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P 311254Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIOTY 8229
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSLAEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TUNIS
SECDEF WASHDC
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 3131

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, SY
SUBJ: RIF'AT'S TROOPS LEAD SOCCER RIOT AND CLASH WITH MILITARY
POLICE

1. ON FRIDAY, MAY 26 RIOT LED BY MEMBERS OF
RIF'AT AL-ASSAD'S DEFENSE COMPANIES BROKE OUT IN ABBASIYYA
STADIUM IN DAMASCUS. ACCORDING TO EYEWITNESS, KUWAITI
TEAM, WHICH WAS PLAYING SYRIAN IN ARAB POLICE FOOTBALL
TOURNAMENT, WON ON DISPUTED LAST MINUTE GOAL IN FINAL PERIOD OF
OVERTIME. SYRIAN FANS, WHO WERE ALREADY INCENSED THAT AN
EARLIER SYRIAN GOAL HAD BEEN DISALLOWED, FELT THAT TIME
HAD RUN OUT AND SWARMED ONTO THE FIELD LED BY A LARGE
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CONTINGENT OF RIF'AT'S TROOPS. THEY PUMMELED THE TUNISIAN
REFEREE AND THE KUWAITI PLAYERS. THE CIVILIAN AND MILITARY
POLICE PRESENT WERE UNABLE TO HANDLE THE SITUATION AND
MILITARY POLICE REINFORCEMENTS WERE SUMMONED.

2. THE MILITARY POLICE BEGAN USING THEIR RIFLE BUTTS TO
WARD OFF ATTACKING TROOPS AND FANS AND VIOLENCE ESCALATED

FROM THERE. SHOTS WERE FIRED AND SOME OF THE RIOTERS WERE SEEN BRANDISHING KNIVES. THE AMBULANCE WHICH CAME TO TRANSPORT THE REFEREE TO THE HOSPITAL WAS ALSO ATTACKED, AND HE WAS FINALLY SPRITED OUT IN A TAXI. CONFLICTING REPORTS ARE CIRCULATING ABOUT CASUALTIES WITH ALL AGREEING THAT SOME PEOPLE WERE SERIOUSLY WOUNDED.

3. NO REPORT OF THE RIOTING HAS APPEARED IN THE SYRIAN MEDIA. MININT ADNAN DABBAGH GAVE AN INTERVIEW TO THE NEWSPAPER AL-BAATH, WHICH APPEARED MAY 30, IN WHICH HE ALLUDES TO EARLIER FOOTBALL-RELATED INCIDENTS AND CLAIMS THAT MEASURES HAVE BEEN INSTITUTED TO PREVENT ANY SUCH PROBLEMS IN THE FUTURE. HE IS MUTE ON THE RIOT AT THE KUWAITI-SYRIAN GAME ALTHOUGH WE ARE TOLD THAT HE PERSONALLY APOLOGIZED TO THE KUWAITI TEAM ABOUT THE INCIDENT. ON SATURDAY, MAY 27, THE TUNISIAN REFEREE WAS INTERVIEWED ON TELEVISION ABOUT THE TOURNAMENT. AGAIN NO MENTION WAS MADE ABOUT THE PREVIOUS NIGHT'S RIOTS, BUT CLEARLY SYRIAN AUTHORITIES WISHED TO DISPEL RUMOR THAT HE HAD BEEN KILLED OR SERIOUSLY INJURED. REFEREE, HOWEVER, SEEMED TO SPEAK WITH SOME DIFFICULTY.

4. DESPITE RUMORS THAT THE TOURNAMENT WOULD BE CANCELLED, MATCHES CONTINUED AND THE KUWAITI TEAM WILL PLAY THE IRAQI CONTINGENT ON EVENING OF MAY 30. FOR THE CHAMPIONSHIP. WE HAVE HEARD THAT THE KUWAITI AMBASSADOR ANGRILY INSISTED
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TO FONMIN KHADDAM THAT THE KUWAITI TEAM BE PROVIDED ADEQUATE SECURITY FOR THE REMAINDER OF THEIR STAY IN SYRIA.

5. COMMENT: NEGATIVE IMPLICATION FOR SYRO-KUWAITI RELATIONS AS THE RESULT OF THE RIOT SEEM TO HAVE BEEN CONTAINED. HOWEVER, THE LACK OF DISCIPLINE DISPLAYED BY RIF'AT'S TROOPS ILLUSTRATE THE CAVALIER ATTITUDE WITH WHICH MANY OF THEM TREAT THEIR FELLOW SYRIANS. THIS SWAGGERING HAS WON THEM WIDESPREAD RESENTMENT AND ANIMOSITY, PARTICULARLY IN DAMASCUS WHERE THEY ARE MOST VISIBLE. SUCH INCIDENTS WILL FURTHER ARISE TENSIONS BETWEEN RIF'AT'S OFFICERS AND OTHER SYRIAN MILITARY PROFESSIONAL IF RIF'AT CONTINUES TO LET HIS MEN GET AWAY WITH SUCH FLAGRANT EXCESSES.
PELLETREAU

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